

Government Abandons Central British Columbians Caught in the Middle of Land Claims Talks

Chilcotin, B.C. - Hausi Wittwer feels abandoned by his adopted country. The Swiss-born businessman is unable to get operating permits for his Chilko River Lodge, which is located on the edge of the Tsilqhot'in Title Lands that were created in 2014. The Provincial Government claims they cannot act, and the Tsilqhot'in First Nation so far has chosen not to act. Mr. Wittwer is increasingly concerned that the Tsilqhot'in are not interested in accommodating non-indigenous businesses on their newly granted lands. "Government consultants told me I don't even have legal access to my property because part of the access road crosses into the Title Lands, but the government has refused my application for an easement and the First Nation threatens to restrict access." says Wittwer. "There is no way I can operate my business under these conditions. At this stage I just want to get bought out at a fair price."

Mr. Wittwer is just one of dozens of business operators placed in an impossible situation by the refusal of both the Federal and Provincial governments to act on the issues that arose as a result of the 2014 Supreme Court decision that granted the Title Lands.

Even though Circle X Ranch is located in the Tatlayoko Valley, on the edge of the new Tsilqhot'in Title Lands, they are feeling the fallout. A significant part of the guest ranch business is conducting guided trail rides into the surrounding mountains. But much of that area now falls into the Title Lands and they cannot get an extension of their guiding permit. "The effect is demoralizing", says Connie Bracewell of Circle X Ranch. "We can't operate properly, and with ongoing negotiations aimed at expanding the Title Lands we are very concerned about the long-term viability of our business. So far the government has abandoned us, and seems more interested in placating First Nations than in addressing the very real problems that have arisen for non-Indigenous property owners and businesses."

According to Petrus Rykes, spokesperson for Canadians For Fairness And Transparency (canadiansforfairnessandtransparency.ca) "Government is creating a tinder-box and seems intent on throwing in a match. They've had plenty of time to respond, and in fact their own consultants told them how to deal with the issues years ago, but they persist in ignoring any non-Indigenous stakeholders. It's time for them to pay attention to the serious problems that have been created."

Negotiators for the Province, the Federal Government, and the Tsilqhot'in First Nation are now hammering out the details of a deal that will cede potentially hundreds of square kilometers of additional land to Tsilqhot'in control, causing a massive exacerbation of all the existing issues.

"It's very clear after all this time that nobody is standing up for the rights of local non-Indigenous stakeholders", said Rykes. "We insist upon designating our own representative to sit at the table while these secret negotiations unfold, to look after our interests. As Canadian citizens, we deserve at least that much."

The Tsilqhot'in First Nation claims a vast area of land in central BC, stretching from Quesnel and Cache Creek in the east, to the Coast Mountains and the Bella Coola Valley in the west (see map on website). Current agreements resulting from the secret negotiations have already granted law-making, taxing, and judicial authority to the Tsilqhot'in, with the intent of creating a new sovereign state in central

British Columbia. This has huge consequences for thousands of non-Indigenous citizens who would be caught in the middle of this land grant. The rights of these Canadian citizens must be protected.

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